June 2009
Volume 2 Issue 2

IMPORTANT DATES

July 15, 2009
- *June Incident reports are due*

July 17, 2009
- *VFIRS Audit due*

August 15, 2009
- *July Incident reports are due*

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Without some goals and efforts to reach, no man can live.
John Dewey

The Fire Service – Its Own Worst Enemy

By Marion A. Long, Virginia NFIRS Program Manager

The fire service has a reputation as being the organization called when all fails or when there is uncertainty as to who to call. It is available upon request and visible in the community. Yes, the men and women, both paid and volunteer, are benevolent, brave, and heroic. But still the fire service is its own worst enemy. The need to better document what it 'does' and the lack of marketing its importance has caused those inside and outside the fire service to not understand its full role and value. As a result, the fire service battles to justify its budgets, resources, and worth.

Here are three recommendations to help the fire service to better market its significance and get credit for all that it 'does':

1. **The fire service needs to tell its full story by documenting and marketing all that it does.** Its full range of calls needs to be recorded and reported. This includes all emergency calls, all public service calls, and all services provided to the public outside and inside its stations. The National Fire Incident Reporting System (NFIRS) is the system in place to document and report the activities of the fire service. For the full story to be told, its incidents need to be in NFIRS. Decisions at the local, state, and national levels that affect the fire service and the public are made based on the incidents that are in NFIRS.

2. **The fire service must ensure that its incident reports are complete.** Incident reporting software is good for making sure incidents are valid. A valid incident passes defined edits. The current standard is NFIRS 5.0 and is based upon the NFPA (National Fire Protection Association) 901 coding standard. Valid incidents are used within and outside the fire service to assess the effectiveness of fire operations, prevention programs, protection systems, and training. However, a valid incident might not be a complete incident. A complete incident tells the full story; it goes beyond the standard edits. An incident report is not complete when it is initially saved by the member making the report. Additional information usually becomes available after an investigation or due to the passing of time. Once changes are known, the incident reports should be updated. For example, the cause of ignition description "under investigation" should never be the final disposition of an incident.

3. **The fire service must use its data to "fight fires with facts".**   The data should be used within and outside the department. Using the data within the department helps to measure effectiveness in better resource utilization, managing costs, reducing fire service injuries, deaths, exposures, and saving property. Using the data outside the department helps to educate the public in death and injury prevention, protection of its property and contents, and the range of services that the fire service provides.

The first established America's fire department, first fire engine, first firehouse, and first paid firefighters were started in Boston, Massachusetts in 1679 -- 330 years ago. Since then, the organized fire service has been protecting individuals, businesses, and property.

For the fire service to be effective today, the need for good documentation is crucial for showing its worth in this time of budget constraints and cuts. The fire service needs to use data as an indispensable tool in its arsenal. The data must be complete and shared in a timely manner at local, state, and national levels. In doing so, the fire service will continue to provide valued service to the community over the next 330 years and get the full recognition that it deserves.

Validation Error

Over the last few months there have been several questions regarding the validation error listed below.[1] The error occurs when the *Fire Spread* in the *Fire Module* and the *Structure Fire Module* do not match. It is easy to overlook this when completing fire reports because each software package requires a different answer for each of these fields. Some require a number, while others require a check box. So, it is very important to pay close attention when completing both modules.

To correct this error, the *Confined to Area of Origin* field listed in the *Fire Module* must match the *Flame Spread* field in the *Structure Fire Module*. Check the *Fire Module (Section D)* under the field named *Confined to Area of Origin* and make sure there is a number or a check mark (depending on your software package) in each field.   In other words, if you complete the *Confined to Area of Origin* field in the *Fire Module* you must complete the *Flame Spread* field in the *Structure Fire Module* AND they must match.

If you have questions or require assistance correcting the error, feel free to contact the Information and Statistics Division.

1. *As of January 2009*

Example of error:

MODULE	ERROR MESSAGE	ERROR TYPE	DATA FIELD
Structure Fire Module	No Flame Spread Must Be False (given Fire Confined To Origin)	Critical	No Flame Spread

Jan-Apr 2009 VFIRS Audit

Fire chiefs have their January through April 2009 VFIRS Audit Reports. The purpose of the audit is to ensure that Virginia's NFIRS data can be used in decision-making to assist the fire service, to reduce fire casualties, and to support fire education and prevention programs. The items listed below show the focus of the audit and the number of incidents statewide:

- Number of incidents reported: **161,703**
- Number of invalid incidents: **1,548**
- Number of incidents with total fire dollar loss $500,000 or more: **41**
- Number of incidents with high response times (one hour or more) or high duration times (one day or more): **296**
- Number of building or vehicle fire incidents with no dollar loss or zero dollar loss: **782**
- Number of structure fires, vehicle fires, or outside fires (one acre or more) with unresolved fire cause information: **1,724**
- Number of building fires with seven or more stories above grade or three or more stories below grade: **26**
- Number of civilian fire deaths: **26**
- Number of departments not grant compliant: **142**

Each fire department should review and resolve the information on its audit report. Return corrections to the Department of Fire Programs by July 17, 2009.